

The Relevance of Social Media in the Era of Covid-19

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Abstract- It is no longer news that the world has been ravaged by the novel coronavirus (known as Covid-19). The interesting part, however, is that people need to be informed of the basic standard operation procedures in order to curb the spread. Hence, people turn to different media for information and enlightenment. During this period of uncertainties, social media become an important point of call. In their various forms, social media play enormous role of making news and data available for users. They provide avenue for increased discussions across various platforms. This study therefore attempted to investigate how the social media are used during the pandemic. The study used questionnaire for data collection, and it was found out, among others, that although the social media allowed for the rapid spread of basic health guidelines, they also brought about increase in the spread of misinformation among the people thereby leading to information overload and confusion. The paper thus held that users should always filter materials shared on the social media before consumption or sharing.

Keywords: Covid-19, social media, information, overload.

I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has been described as an infectious disease. It was reported in 2019 from China. And since then, it has become an emergency situation around with over 7m cases and over 400,000 deaths recorded so far (14). However, at present there is no vaccine. As a result, information gathering becomes important as people need to be adequately informed. This is because getting information during an emergency like covid-19 can facilitate the response to situation. Information is needed to make informed decisions. This is vital to a successful management of the situation as it will include warnings, alerts, responses, available assistance, etc. (4). Hence, information is as critical as food and water during emergencies. It is vital to note that the kind of information gotten during an emergency like Covid-19 to a large extent determines the rate of survival or deaths.

Information is thus critical, and in deed there are various means of getting information during the covid-19. However, during this pandemic, the adoption and uses of the social media have gained popularity perhaps due to their ability to pass information across the geographically dispersed population within very a short period of time. People's access to breaking news has been made easier through the adoption or employment of such social media platforms as WhatsApp, Liked, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc. It is thus the desire of this research to investigate and examine how the use of those social media platforms has impacted people's access to information during Covid-19.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the perceived usefulness of social media during Covid-19?
2. How reliable are the social media perceived as source of information during Covid-19?

III. HYPOTHESES

There is no relationship between the use of social media (platforms) and the spread of panic during emergency like Covid-19.

IV. LITERATUREREVIEW

4.1 Social Media

Social media describes a method of communication that is different from the traditional methods of reporting, broadcasting, etc. that has become widely used with the spread of the Internet. This is in line with (4) who argued that social media is used to simply refer to the exact opposite of the traditional broadcasting and reporting methods in that it (social media) is characterized by immediacy and interactivity. The word social media thus means using web-based and mobile technologies thereby making communication into an interaction discourse (3).

Defining social media, Kaplan and Heanlein(2010) cited in (3) held that it is a collection of Internet-based technologies built on the foundation of Web 2.0 and which gives room for creating and exchanging user-generated contents. According to (6), social media creates highly interactive or mutually active platforms through which communities as well as individuals co-create, modify, discuss and share those user-generated contents.

It is also used to mean a place within which people socialize rather just a means of communication. With the availability of smart devices and affordable data plans, social media have thus become the primary source of information dissemination (1-3) across various locations and users.

(4) argued that unlike the conventional broadcasting, individuals, in social media, can join any network either using their real names or anonymously using 'pen names'. Users are allowed to give comments immediately and give additional information regarding any content. Sharing is thus made possible within a short period. Hence, social media have become so relevant that as at 2010, it was reported that, for instance, quite above 145 million social media users send an around 90 million tweets in a day (7). They are very powerful tools of reaching millions around the world within a short time.

Social media, in addition, are made up of various platforms, digital tools, and application with the main attribute of which is that content is user-generated. Hence, in their contribution, (9) argued that social media should not be viewed and regarded basically as the platforms on which users post; they should rather be seen as the contents that are shared or posted on those platforms.

Social media are in many different forms including social blogs, podcasts, weblogs, etc. There are 6 basic types or forms of social media:

Collaborative projects such as wikipedia, etc.

Content communities such as YouTube, etc.

Blogs and microblogs like Twitter

Social networking sites which include Facebook, etc.

Virtual game worlds such as world of War craft

Virtual social world such as Second Life

Meanwhile, social media are usually used for performing various functions. As argued by (6), however, there are seven (7) functions of social media. These functional blocks are:

Identity: This has to do with the degree to which user reveals his or her identity. This involves revealing such information as name, gender, date of birth, location and job or profession.

Conversations: This is concerned with the degree to which the user communicates with other users on the social media arena. This could be for instance, to find true love, engage in political debates, or be aware of trending topics.

Sharing: This, according to (6), is concerned with exchanging, distributing and receiving content.

Presence: This has to do with the extent to which individual users can know whether others are reachable or accessible. This, in other words, means that users are able to know where others are in terms of available or hidden status.

Relationships: it refers to the range which social media users can relate with one another. This has to do with users having some kinds of intimacy or association that might lead them to converse or share objects of sociality or even come together, etc.

Reputation: This is concerned with the users identifying each other's standing in a social media arena or setting. Reputation generally has to do with trust (6).

Groups: This is concerned with formation of communities and sub-communities in social media setting. This involves putting one's followers, friends and fans into different groups as determined and created by the individual users. Groups could be open or close or secret.

4.2 Social Media and Covid-19

During pandemic situation like the Covid-19, the power of social media becomes significant and notable. For example, using the conventional broadcasting during emergency is usually hindered by such problems as power outage, facilities failure, etc. However, with social media, such problems are minimized since the social media platforms are easily accessible even using small mobile phones. By this, information travels faster.

It has been acknowledged that the main objectives or goal of emergency management include saving lives as well as minimizing damage and preventing the occurrence (8). To that end, communication is a very vital factor in successfully managing an emergency such as the Covid-19 (10). In order to achieve those objectives of emergency management, the use of social media is very relevant considering their advantages above the conventional means of broadcasting and reporting. This is particularly true considering the timely manner in which information must be transmitted to a large population in various locations.

In their contribution, (5) stated, that in a situation like Covid-19, communication is conveniently grouped into:

Communication from top to top and this refers to authority to authority

Communication from top to bottom which has to do with authority to the public

Communication from the bottom to the top i.e. public to the authority

Communication from the bottom to the bottom and that is within the public(citizens)

The use or adoption of social media helps in addressing these four divisions of communication. This is in contrary to the traditional means in which authorities are seen as the sole sender (super ordinate) and citizens as passive beneficiaries of information (subordinate). This approach is outdated considering the complex nature of the modern society (12). In other words, social media provide for the multi-directional and multi-purpose communication by allowing individual users to become the creators, producers as well as the consumers of information.

According to (13), social media have critical components of emergency preparedness, response and recovery. In the same vein, (2) argued that through social media, users are empowered to add to their knowledge repertoire through an unrestricted flow of information

Social media during Covid-19 is therefore, a forum where people converge to relate and connect with one another, share feelings, exchange knowledge and ideas, mobilise for a cause, seek advice, offer guidance, etc. It removes communication barriers by allowing users to have a voice and participate in any topic. In short, during Covid-19, social media can be used in enhancing a community's capacity in preparing for emergencies as well as making decision and management. It can be used for information gathering and transmission; Enlightenment campaigns; Fundraising for the affected; Request for support; etc. Victims themselves can directly request disaster relief through social media.

4.3 Social Media and Misinformation during Covid-19

There is no denying that freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. However, during this pandemic, many seem to have abused this right through fake news, misinformation and disinformation. According to (11), disinformation is the act of spreading false news or information with the primary aim of deceiving the populace. On the other hand, misinformation has to do with sharing such materials without the intention of deceiving or causing harm. During this pandemic, social media become awash with different kinds of materials which are hoax. Different hypotheses were formulated and spread across the social media. For instance, fakes materials have emerged linking the novel disease to bat infestation (using old video), 5G, etc. However, these have not been established and have in fact been debunked (1). Hence, with social media now widely in use, unfounded and incorrect information are circulated, thereby becoming a serious problem (4).

The use of social media to spread false news is worrisome. Some even use them to promote "cures" for Covid-19 thereby misleading consumers. According to (11), this was the case in Iran where many died after consuming industrial or bootleg alcohol following fake information that it would cure Covid-19. Consequently, through the spread of incorrect information, panic can be caused among the people. This is because information transmission through social media does not follow the usual procedures of news collection, confirmation and editing. Some contents generate controversy and abusive reactions so much so to the point of no control. The following therefore are the main roles that social media play during the outbreak.

A source of information which can keep us safe and make informed decisions

A source of misinformation: - This is because finding reliable contents is difficult.

An influence on response to the pandemic: They can be used to promote (Standard Operation Procedures) SOPs such as social distancing, use of face masks, etc. thereby influencing people's behaviours.

A market platform: With lockdown in place, social media enable sellers and buyers to meet and transact.

V. METHODS

A 10-item questionnaire was administered to 157 respondents. Their responses were analysed using mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product Moment Coefficient. In details, RQs 1 and 2 were analysed using simple percentage and mean scores while the sole hypothesis was analysed using Pearson Product Moment Coefficient to show the

possible relationship or nexus between the use and adoption of social media (platforms) and spreading of panic during Covid-19. Each of the RQs and the hypothesis was presented in tables.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

RQ1: What is the Perceived Usefulness of Social Media during Covid-19?

Table 1: Perceived Usefulness of Social Media during Covid-19

S/N	Perceived Usefulness of Social Media during COVID-19	Mean (X)
1.	Social media promote awareness of covid-19 among the people	3.43
2.	Social media make it easy for information to reach the public within a short time during covid-19	3.29
3.	Social media provide easy access to safety guidelines	3.27
4.	Social media bring about information overload during covid-19	2.29
5.	Social media instill fears in the people during covid-19	2.27
	Grand Mean (X)	2.910

Table 1 indicated that Social media promote awareness of covid-19 among the people was ranked highest with a mean score of 3.43 out of 4. This was followed by Social media make it easy for information to reach the public within a short time during covid-19, Social media provide easy access to safety guidelines, Social media bring about information overload during covid-19 and Social media instill fears in the people during covid-19 having the means of 3.29, 3.27, 2.29 and 2.27 respectively. Hence, using 2.0 as the average benchmark, it can be concluded that the perception of respondents on the usefulness and relevance of social media during Covid-19 was positive.

RQ2: What is the Perceived Reliability of Social Media as Source of information during Covid-19?

Table 2: Perceived reliability of social media as source of information during Covid- 19

S/N	Perceived Reliability of Social Media as Source of information	Mean (X)
1.	Social media promote misinformation during the covid-19	3.20
2.	Social media enhances the spread of fake news during covid-19	3.18
3.	Social media could lead to confusion due to the array of materials shared and whose genuineness are not known	3.10

4.	Materials shared on the social media should not be solely relied on to make decisions during emergency like covid-19	3.09
5.	Social media help the people to make informed decisions during the covid-19	2.97
	Grand Mean (X)	3.108

It could be noted from Table 2 that the respondents were of the opinion that Social media promote misinformation in the period of covid-19 with mean score of 3.20 ranking highest, followed by Social media enhances the spread of fake news during covid-19 with mean score of 3.18. similarly, respondents were of the opinion that Social media could lead to confusion due to the array of materials shared and whose genuineness are not known, materials shared on the social media should not be solely relied on to make decisions during emergency like covid-19 and Social media help the people to make informed decisions during the covid-19 with mean score of 3.10, 3.09 and 2.97 respectively. Therefore, with the use of 2.0 as the benchmark, it means that the respondents had positive perception to the reliability of social media as a means of sourcing for information during Covid-19.

HO₁: There is no significant relationship between use of social media and the spread of panic during emergency like Covid-19.

Table 3: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient showing relationship between use of social media and the spread of panic during emergency like Covid-19

Variables	No	Mean	SD Df	Calculatedr-value	Criticalr-value	Sig.
Social Media	157	5.78	3.563	155	0.731	0.195
Panic Spread	157	3.27	1.312	155		

**= Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)

Table 3 displays data concerning the correlation between social media usage and panic dissemination during emergencies such as Covid-19. The table indicates a computed r-value of 0.731, with a critical r-value of .195 at a significance level of 0.05, with 155 degrees of freedom. The analysis reveals that as the computed r-value exceeds the critical r-value, the null hypothesis is rejected, leading to the acceptance of the alternate hypothesis. Consequently, a significant relationship between social media usage and panic propagation during emergencies like Covid-19 is established.

VII. CONCLUSION

The truth is that the emergence of social media has brought about changes that are noticeable in the way emergencies are managed. They make it possible to disseminate, acquire and analyze information faster and more efficiently. It is however, important to note that in spite of their numerous benefits during Covid-19, their ability to escalate the situation should not be jettisoned.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are made.

- ❖ Users should fact check all contents shared on social media before spreading or consumption.
- ❖ There should be proper regulation of social media contents to avoid misinformation.
- ❖ Trusted networks should be created during emergency situations so people know where to get reliable information.
- ❖ Carriers of fake news should be appropriately charged.

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